

**Education Committee
Wednesday, March 15, 2023**

House Bill 6881: An Act Concerning Various Revisions to the Education Statutes Related to Educator Compensation and Paraeducators - Support

Senator McCrory, Representative Currey, Senator Berthel, Representative McCarty and members of the Education Committee:

My name is Maureen Thurz and I am a resident of Tolland. I work as an ABA/DTI Special Education Paraeducator in the Tolland Public Schools District at the Tolland Middle School. Previously I worked at Birch Grove Primary School. I am writing the following testimony in support of HB 6881: An Act Concerning Various Revisions to the Education Statutes Related to Educator Compensation and Paraeducators:

Paraeducators are on the front lines of student learning. We provide one-on-one assistance to special education students, reinforce instruction, manage classrooms and support English language learners. We celebrate with our students when they succeed and try to redirect them when they act out verbally and physically. Despite the important roles we play, paraeducators are among the lowest paid staff members in our schools. We can't afford our healthcare and there is little chance we can afford to retire with dignity - unless we work a second or third job. We don't get paid during the summer and we can't collect unemployment.

There is no wonder paraeducators are leaving the profession in droves, leaving more than 1,300 paraeducator positions vacant in districts throughout the state. HB 6881 is an important step in improving the work life and career opportunities of Connecticut's paraeducators. But most of all this bill is an opportunity to begin to treat paraeducators with the respect and dignity we have earned.

For me personally, I began work as a paraeducator at Tolland in October of 2009. Previously I had been a Business Systems Analyst in IT at a major insurance company and, unfortunately, was part of a massive layoff during the 2009 recession. To be truthful, after being hired by the district, my original intention was to stay for a year or so, while I looked for another position as a Business Systems Analyst elsewhere. However, at the end of my first year the district began a new Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) program for preschoolers and Kindergarteners with Autism and other disabilities. At that time, the district provided a rigorous training program and the paraeducators that were part of the initial program were very well trained.

We had children come in that were non-verbal and by the end of preschool were chatting away. I had a student who could not sit still in a chair for more than a few seconds, so we would run his programs wherever he wanted to. Whether that be on the floor or sometimes he liked to sit in a cardboard box! We made it work. Watching these children learn skills to allow them to become more independent was so rewarding. I absolutely loved what I did. And needless to say, my plans of having an "interim" job as a paraeducator has now turned into 13 years.

This intensive continued training that I was lucky enough to have has unfortunately not continued. Paraeducators are most often hired and "thrown in" to their position with little to no training, which is a disservice to the employee and to the students.

I have worked with various students with multiple disabilities and needs. I have worked with children who have hit me, spit at me and grabbed at my hair pulling out chunks. Most of the time the ones that are sometimes the “hardest”, touch your heart the most. Helping them to learn other ways to communicate their wants and needs makes all of the hard work worth it.

Currently, I work in our district's middle school in a self contained ABA room. We have students with intense needs that include cognitive, physical and medical disabilities. I work with three different students. There are three paraeducators in our room and we rotate weekly working with each student on a one to one basis. We teach them using a discrete trial instruction format. Each program is identified by a goal on the student's IEP. These include both academic skills and Functional Life skills. We take data on each of the programs that we teach. We also follow Behavioral plans that are written by a Board Certified Behavior Analyst. We also collect data on behaviors on a daily basis. If a student attends any inclusion classes with their peers, we often need to gather materials and modify the curriculum content to be appropriate for their individual developmental level. We also attend and support them in the inclusion class.

When the student attends “specials” such as Music or Physical Education, we are there to help them be part of the class. Some of our students have some mobility issues, so we need to help them participate in a unified Physical Education class.

Our students have lunch in the classroom. Two out of the three students have some feeding limitations. We have to help support them in expanding their food choices while also ensuring that they are safe while eating new foods and textures.

Two of our students are limited verbally and have acquired Communication Devices within the last year. These devices give them the capability to have a “voice” and increase their ability to communicate with others more effectively. We work with the SLP's and Case Manager to learn how to navigate the devices and how to use and model them for the student.

Our students have various medical needs. We have had students who experience seizures. We need to be trained by the school nurses and follow a medical plan in case they have a seizure while they are at school. We have students with hearing loss, and we work with the SLP's and audiologists to familiarize ourselves with how to use their hearing devices with them.

We usually do not have time for planning, gathering materials or even to have team meetings with our case manager.

I have also been trained in how to de-escalate various behaviors. This is an extremely needed skill in any paraeducator's employment, regardless of where they work in the school district. Newer paraeducators do not always receive this much needed training. I have received PMT training, but very few individuals in any of the schools in our district have received this training. Even when they have requested it.

I believe that most people do not really realize everything that a paraeducator does in our job roles. Many “older” individuals may still think of the times when they went to school. Teachers “aides” at that time were more of

exactly what that title represents. They supervised recess and lunch, made copies and did bus duty. Today's paraeducator is so different from that. (Though some still do those things in addition to all of the other requirements of their job.)

Very rarely were children with more severe needs or multiple disabilities placed in the public schools and if they were, they were not included in 'general education' classrooms with their peers. Paraeducators today are a little bit of everything!

My wish would be for everyone to realize how important and ESSENTIAL we are to the school system. And that being a paraeducator is just as much a career as being a certified teacher is.

I have been a paraeducator for 13 years and I currently make \$17.92 per hour. Can you imagine that? Do you know that Aldi's pays their cashiers \$18.00 per hour? How insulting is that? How can we be a respected profession when the pay scale is ridiculous for the amount of work we do?

Also, paraeducators need to receive more consistent and relevant training to their position.

Paraeducators can no longer be moved from place to place within the school, with the thought process that we are all interchangeable. We now have special education paraeducators, ABA and Intensive needs paraeducators, Behavioral paraeducators, Math and Reading Interventionist paraeducators, etc. Each of these subgroups needs to have pertinent training in regards to what they are doing in their job role.

This benefits not only the students, but the entire school district. We are a crucial part of the education team and staff. We need to be treated that way.

Currently we are very short-staffed. This means that we are expected to do even more than ever. How do we expect people to stay in an environment where they are overworked, under trained, undervalued and severely underpaid? It can also mean that IEP accommodations are not being met, which is illegal, and also means that the child is not getting all of the services that they need and require to be successful.

We absolutely love our students and want to do everything to see them succeed. But so many paraeducators leave because they feel undervalued, do not get proper training and, most of all, cannot survive on the wages being paid. It is a shame to have to lose valuable employees who really love and enjoy what they do, but cannot afford to stay in their job. We deserve to have, AT MINIMUM, a living wage and affordable health benefits.

In conclusion, besides being a paraeducator, I am also a mother of a son with multiple disabilities. My son has graduated, but I can tell you that a wonderful special education teacher was so important for him to have, but equally important - if not more important - were the paraeducators that worked with him. He learned so much more when he had a dedicated, well trained one to one paraeducator assigned to him.

We are so important in the lives and futures of our students.

Please consider passing this bill to help us get the basic items we both deserve and need to stay in our jobs, and to make the profession of paraeducator be recognized as the important career that it is. This will also encourage others to want to become a paraeducator.

Thank you so much for your time and consideration. Please support student learning and paraeducators and vote for House Bill 6881.

Maureen Thurz
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